

“Coming To Dinner” – Luke 24:36b-48

“They were startled and terrified, and thought they had seen a ghost.” With what short and powerful brush strokes Luke paints a picture of the disciples’ reaction to Jesus appearing among them! Their reaction – startled and terrified – seems reasonable enough, given the circumstances, even with Jesus’ opening words, “Peace be with you.” What wouldn’t you give to be able to go back and see for yourself those times when people suddenly recognized the risen Jesus in their midst? Those reactions must have gotten a bit stale fairly quickly for Jesus – I mean, every time he approached someone that knew him it seems to have been the same kind of terrified and fearful reaction, people clawing backwards and cowering in fear before what they were certain must have been a ghost. We can understand that – after all, they had seen him die horribly, they had watched his body taken down from the cross, had at least heard if not seen for themselves that his body had been properly prepared for burial and buried in a cave. Seeing him now in their midst was more than they could believe, and so they were sure they were either losing their minds or this was a ghost. It was not easy for them to believe that this really, really was Jesus, alive and well.

People over the past two thousand years have had similar trouble believing that Jesus rose from being dead, and they have invented many creative attempts to explain the events away. The ways that people have tried (and still try) to avoid the reality of Jesus’ resurrection range from declaring that the whole three years was either just people imagining things, or was a smoke-and-mirrors trick by God, or the favourite which was it was all a trick pulled off by people. At the one end of the spectrum are those who claim that Jesus was so God-like that he couldn’t really have died – “how can you kill God?” is their question – and that it only appeared that he died. Groups such as the Gnostics (from the Greek word ‘gnosis’ which is the root of our word ‘knowledge’) made those kinds of claims. At the other end of the spectrum are those who deny Jesus’ death and resurrection on the grounds that Jesus was completely human, and that his death was faked. Two popular examples of this type of denial are books like the DaVinci Code and movies such as The Last Temptation of Christ. Most often in these stories Jesus subsequently lived a ‘normal’ life (albeit not ‘ever after’), usually marrying Mary Magdalene and leaving a genetic trail of mysterious descendants.

The presence of this passage in Luke’s gospel hints strongly that these kinds of denial stories were quickly circulating in the decades following Christ’s earthly ministry, his death and resurrection. Luke is careful to record the details, especially of Jesus calming their fears by saying, “Touch me and see, for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” They did, touch him, that is. I’m sure some of them at least expected to put their hand right through this apparition, but were able to feel for themselves the scars, the holes, and his warm, alive flesh. With joy, wonderment, and still disbelief, they marveled at his appearance.

Then comes the most startling detail of all. “Got anything to eat?”, Jesus asks them, and proceeds to scarf down some of their freshly caught and Bar-B-Q’d dinner. He ate the grilled fish, “in their presence”, Luke reminds us. The disciples were witness to Jesus eating, and that is important because everyone KNOWS that ghosts don’t eat. Consistently throughout the ages, people have understood that ghosts may even seem to be solid, but ghosts NEVER eat! (This is NOT, however, to be confused with the milk and cookies that disappear on Christmas Eve!)

These events, and the detailed recording of them, served one major purpose – to affirm to the disciples, to affirm to us, the reality of Jesus’ resurrection. This passage especially points to ordinary human actions – talking, seeing, touching, sharing food – to connect this highly extra-ordinary event to with the lives of everyday people.

However, there’s an interesting dual relationship that happens here as well – the disciples feed Jesus, and then Jesus proceeds to feed them with the word in scripture. This feeding of the disciples by

the fed Jesus served to provide both the cause for his appearance with them and the meaning and purpose that was to be served. Once the disciples had gotten over their immediate question of “what’s happening here?” there was a second question right behind – namely, “why?”, or perhaps better phrased as, “what does it mean?” Jesus went on to explain that his coming to dinner with them was not merely to prove the reality of his resurrection, but that there was a reason and a purpose behind it all.

The reason, the cause of his appearance among them was, according to Jesus, to fulfill scripture. He not only opened their minds to understand the scriptures, but also pointed out how what he had said when with them before about everything written about him in the Law and the Prophets (in scripture) must be fulfilled, and was indeed being fulfilled by his very presence with them. Not only was Jesus’ resurrection real, he pointed out that it was no accident, that it was anticipated and foretold in scripture. This gives the reality of it all infinitely more depth, doesn’t it?

Not only more depth, but with the intentionality of these events now the question becomes one of “what is God’s purpose in all this?” a question that Jesus answered for the disciples, and indeed for us as well. “That repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in the Messiah’s name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” Ah, now there is a purpose and meaning worthy of God’s intervention in history, a purpose and meaning deep enough for such miraculous events. Repentance and forgiveness of sins – truly God’s hand at work in Jesus. Proclaimed to all nations – events significant enough to bring meaning to the entire world.

Moreover, there is a subsequent purpose, not to be overlooked, or forgotten. “You are witnesses to these things”, Jesus told those disciples on the shore, and tells us today. We are, in our turn, witnesses to the profound saving events of Jesus’ death, resurrection and reappearance. We are witnesses to the continuing presence of Christ among us, proclaiming “Peace be with you.” We are witnesses also to his call to witness and proclaim.

To the people he met on that shore the risen Christ said, “Touch me and see.” To us who come here to meet the risen Christ, he still says, “touch me and see.” “How can we?” we protest, “it’s too long ago and too far away”. To those who in joy still wonder and have trouble believing, Christ also asks, “got anything to eat?”, and we say, “yes, but how can we feed you?” How indeed? Well, he’s told us how to do that as well. “As you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me”, Christ reminds us, and the truth begins to dawn anew. Touch him, through the gentle holding of a hand busy otherwise trying to wring comfort from grief. Feed him, through the filling of a plate with pancakes and sausage. Clothe him, with the gifts of socks, shoes, sweaters, coats – and above all, dignity. Join him in healing, through providing the money for medicine, soap, clean water, and a signal that someone cares.

Here is our reality; here is where we begin to understand, to believe, that this is no ghost, no ‘other-worldly’ spectre. As we touch Christ through touching others he powerfully reminds us of his true humanity, how he still shares with us the full range of human emotions, joy and frustration, excitement and disappointment, satisfaction and hunger and thirst. In Christ’s demonstration of power over even death itself he reassures us of his divineness, truly one with God, fulfilling the promise of mercy, grace, forgiveness and reconciliation. In his presence with us through his Holy Spirit, he continues to bring us the peace he promised, reassuring us that the naysayers are wrong, the spiritual hijackers are wrong, the deniers are wrong, that we are right to believe and proclaim repentance and forgiveness in his name.

He lives! The risen Christ lives, and touches us still. Christ is real, and right, and the good news he brought and continues to bring, the good news of God’s grace and forgiveness are real. He lives, and because he lives, we live also. Thanks be to God!